

Mobile food vendors rolling around town

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A new trend is hitting the streets in Bryan-College Station: gourmet food trucks.

Veritas Wine & Bistro's restaurant on wheels is making the rounds around town, and Madden's Casual Gourmet plans to be serving meals on the go by the end of the month.

Veritas executive chef Tai Lee said Chef Tai's Mobile Gourmet offers several types of catering and lunch and dinner from wherever the custom vehicle is parked.

And Lee is welcoming Madden's and others to the field. With more mobile vendors in the market, he said, the lunch crowd will begin to look for the trucks and move away from fast-food options.

"You want more people to jump on it so we can create this movement. With one drop, the wave is really shallow. But with a bucket of water going in, the wave is really bigger," he said.

Brazos County Health Department officials said it has issued 31 permits for mobile food vendors, most of which operate in Bryan. The permits are similar to restaurant permits in that they have certain requirements that must be met.

Brenda Galvan, an environmental compliance officer for Bryan, said the city has 17 permits for mobile food vendors. Lee's is currently the only truck selling gourmet food. Other mobile food vehicle types includes ice-cream trucks, ones that specialize in barbecue and others that do door-to-door sales with groceries, she said.

Most of the permits are for taco trucks, said Mark Jurica, the city's treatment and compliance manager.

Lee said his mobile truck opened for business Sept. 14 after he spent six months looking into similar operations in other areas of the country.

"We definitely saw some opportunity where we could fill the need this town [has]," he said.

He said the idea is to have quality food at a reasonable cost.

Lee said his prices are lower because the truck doesn't have the costs associated with a standing restaurant.

"We could charge everything about 15 percent lower than what normal pricing would be," he said.

The truck -- which cost Lee about \$100,000 to outfit -- will help introduce his restaurant's food to people who might not have ever visited, he said.

"People have a perceived notion that 'Oh, it's going to be expensive' or 'I don't feel I dressed up well enough to go there.' We can get rid of all that. You might be shopping at H-E-B and might see us in the mobile truck and say, 'You know what, I always wanted to try their food. I'll give it a shot,'" he said.

Two of a kind

Peter Madden, of Madden's Casual Gourmet in downtown Bryan, said his truck, which will be dubbed Madden's Street Cuisine, was supposed to be ready in October.

"It's a slow process apparently," he said of outfitting the trucks with the necessary equipment.

Madden said he's been considering expanding the business to include a mobile food truck for several years after noticing how popular the vehicles are in New York. However, for the past year, he said he's been too busy with the restaurant and his children to be able to devote enough time to the venture.

"Within the last six months to a year, the food truck trend has really been coming on strong all over the nation," he said. "That really put a fire under my tail to get out there and do it."

The food truck allows for another revenue stream without a huge investment, he said, adding that the company building his truck also built Lee's truck. A mobile food truck can run anywhere from \$50,000 to \$100,000, compared to the half a million dollars it would cost to build a restaurant.

Madden said his restaurant does "quite a bit" of catering and that the truck could help serve that purpose when cooking on-site is needed.

It will also provide mobile marketing, Madden said, and will serve to advertise the company's newest venture -- Madden's Market -- which will be set up this summer near Independence Harley-Davidson in College Station.

"It's a real versatile unit," he said.

Like Lee, Madden said, he will serve food similar to what is offered in his restaurant, such as crab cakes. But it will also include food considered to be convenient for the on-the-go crowd, such as tacos, burgers, fish and chips, chili and homemade ice cream.

"The main thing that drives it is, 'What's going to be quick?' ... People walking up to it don't have all day," he said.

When it comes to knowing where to park the truck, Madden said, "part of my game plan is to call Tai."

"It's not worth driving a truck out and parking somewhere if you're not going to generate business," he said.

Madden said he also plans to do a lot of online and social-media marketing to let people know where the truck will be.

"Eventually, you kind of build some repetition into it," he said, describing his plan to devote certain days of the week to particular locations.

He said he'll eventually have to hire a few more employees, but for now he and one employee -- who has already been trained to prepare the truck's food -- will be manning the vehicle.

"I think it will be a blast to go out on that truck," he said.

Madden said if he decided to add another truck in the future, it would likely be in another market, such as Austin or Houston.

"I don't want to lose Madden's downtown, especially with the amount of food trucks I have a feeling might be coming. I think one is all I'll need," he said.

Marketing

Lee said he'll also be using the Internet, e-mail and social media to tell people where his truck will be.

"Twitter, Facebook doesn't cost anything but my time," he said.

When he first started in September, Lee said, he had a difficult time convincing companies to allow him to park the truck in their parking lots. Fortunately, he said, several regulars at the restaurant trusted them enough to give them a shot.

"Then it just became word of mouth," he said.

Having a truck at a business can help with cross-promotion, said Lee, describing how being parked at one of Chase banks on William D. Fitch Parkway this week helped draw some attention to the new bank branch.

The goal for this year, he said, is to reach the point where he parks the truck based on where the people are during that time of day.

"We're starting to calculate where people move and put us somewhere that's not going to interfere with existing businesses and just kind of give a new opportunity for people who are underserved at this point," he said.

Manning the truck

Veritas chefs and employees work in the truck on rotation, he said. Working in the truck under constantly changing conditions and possibilities, he said, is the perfect extra step for his junior line cooks to take before they reach the sous-chef status.

Lee said they tweaked some of the restaurant's menu items to make them more fitting for the food truck.

"We can do everything at Veritas on the menu replicated on the truck," he said.

Lee said people who stop at food trucks have different preferences.

"People like convenience. They want something they can handle in one hand," he said. "They don't want to sit down with a fork and knife."

Lee's mobile menu includes barbecue pulled pork tacos, a Korean short rib barbecue bowl, rice bowls, burgers, sandwiches, burritos and hot wings. Menu items average about \$8.

"We are designing a dish where it can be consumed without too much problem, without too much formality, but still giving a flavor

profile that is very much what Veritas is," he said. "The sauce presentation may not be this nice beautiful swish, but it's still there. So when you eat it, you say, 'You know what, visually it's not as pretty, but my taste bud and my brain and my tummy says I just had a Veritas food.' That was sort of our goal."

On the Web

Chef Tai's Mobile Gourmet

* cheftai.com/blog

* Follow @ChefTai on Twitter for location updates

Madden's Street Cuisine

* Follow @MaddensMobile on Twitter for location updates.

* For more information, call 676-2303.